Bloom's Literature

Trojan Women

The play ... ends in total nihilism. What the Greeks felt as a subtle contradiction, the contradiction of the world in which they had to live, appears to us who see the play from the outside as a negation, a refusal.... Hecuba's final despair ... answers the terrible words of Poseidon. The gods are killed with the men, and that common death is the lesson of the tragedy.

—Jean-Paul Sartre, "Why the Trojan Women?"

Introduction to Sartre's adaptation of the Trojan Women

Troades (Trojan Women) is one of the most harrowing plays ever staged, perhaps the darkest drama in the ancient Greek canon, and a consensus choice as one of the greatest antiwar plays ever written. Exploring the annihilating consequences of war as well as key existential truths, the play dramatizes the aftermath of the fall of Troy to the Greeks. Following the successful stratagem of the Trojan Horse, after a 10-year siege, Troy has been taken, sacked, and is being set aflame as the Greeks prepare to return home. The city's male inhabitants have all been massacred, and the women of Troy await their fate, to be distributed as booty to their new Greek masters. The history of a once grand kingdom has ended in catastrophe. Perhaps no other of Euripides' plays better illustrates the contention that he is the most modern of the classical dramatists, our contemporary in his apocalyptic, nihilistic vision. The Trojan Women remains an unsettling work of complex meanings and unconventional methods. In the play Euripides violates virtually every dictum of Aristotelian tragedy while establishing an alternative, revolutionary dramatic strategy whose impact can be detected in later expressionistic and symbolic drama, in the theater of cruelty and absurdist modern drama.

Critic E. M. Blaiklock has described Euripides as "the most historically significant of Greek dramatists," whose innovations helped define persistent dramatic traditions. By adapting standard mythic subjects so freely and radically Euripides brought a new kind of invention, of both plot and character, into drama. By extending the range of drama from paragons and exceptional circumstances to ordinary and complex characters in recognizable situations, Euripides enhanced dramatic realism and psychological truthfulness. Euripides would establish a precedent for Shakespearean and later tragicomedy by blurring the distinction between comedy and tragedy. Finally, in the Trojan Women especially, Euripides deceters his play from a focus on a single protagonist—the usual focus of a tragedy's action—to multiple centers of interest, with action virtually halted to display a central tragic situation, unified by theme and symbol. The Trojan Women is perhaps the most extreme example of Euripides' "flaunting of our conception of dramatic form," in the words of critic H. D. F. Kitto. In the Trojan Women the prescribed plot elements admired and advised by Aristotle are eliminated. The entire play is aftermath; Troy has fallen, and the time for dramatic action is essentially over. Euripides' focus shifts to what critic Jasper Griffin has called a "mournful pageant of suffering." There is neither suspense nor surprises, neither reversal of fortune nor relief by divine or human intercession or mitigation. Instead of the revelation of the tragic destiny of a central hero through a series of arranged crises and conflicts, Euripides relies on a sequence of episodic intensification, of escalating tension and misery to test the limit of endurance for both the play's characters and audience in revealing the brutality and horror of the human condition. The Trojan Women offers a new conception of tragedy with a collective tragic hero, the mainly offstage Greek victors, and a collective tragic victim, the Trojan survivors, who claim primacy. It also employs a radical dramatic structure in which the logic of steadily evolving action is replaced by a deepening awareness and intensification of the play's central subject of human suffering. Plot, character, and situation are conceived symbolically rather than realistically, orchestrated into a stark and terrifying tragic spectacle.

Ever the iconoclast and violator of consoling illusions, Euripides presents war stripped of any heroism except in suffering and the will to survive under the worst possible circumstances. The Trojan Women reverses convention by assigning dignity and compassion to the defeated and inhumanity to the conquerors. If the saying is true that history is written by the victors, Euripides counters by presenting the story of the vanquished. War is displayed devoid of any grandeur and glory as the most destructive and futile of human endeavors, brutalizing and dehumanizing winners and losers alike. Troy, symbolic of civilization itself, is wiped out in an apocalypse of flames and cruelty. Wives, mothers, and sisters are stripped of their identities and human roles, to become the chattel of their new masters, who have violated every revered human bond and source of reverence—home, family, religion, and nation. Ironically, in the background, as consequence for the Greeks' hubris, is the certain doom that awaits them on their homeward voyage. Beyond its radical challenge to the accepted heroic code of battlefield honor and glory based on enemies
When the *Trojan Women* was first staged in 415 BCE the Athenians had been fighting a crippling war with Sparta for 16 years, and there still remained more than a decade before Athens's ultimate defeat in 404. Having written patriotic plays, such as the *Heracleidae* and the *Suppliants* at the early stages of the Peloponnesian War, Euripides, as the war futilely dragged on, increasingly dramatized its costs and consequences in the suffering of the defeated and moral corruption of the victors (in *Hecuba* and the *Trojan Women*), in its irrational causes (*Helen*), and in its destructiveness and wasteful sacrifice (in *Andromache*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *Iphigenia in Aulis*). Beyond detecting disillusionment over the course of the Peloponnesian War some scholars have identified an even more immediate context for the *Trojan Women* in Euripides' response to Athens's siege and destruction in 414 BCE of the neutral island state of Melos in which Athenians slaughtered all the men and enslaved the women and children. Thucydides would regard the event as a tipping point in the moral decline of Athens. Such an ignominious use of Athenian might must have contributed to Euripides' skepticism about the concept of a just and ennobling war, and he subversively refracts the circumstances of the recent victims of Athens's brute force to the mythical nemeses of the Greeks, the Trojans, and the Greeks' most celebrated military triumph.

The *Trojan Women* opens with a prologue by the god Poseidon, who surveys the ruin of the city that he had helped to build. "Nothing remains for me," he declares, "but to abandon my shrines and altars in this city … bitter enemies of Troy have prevailed." The Greeks have triumphed in large measure because of the divine assistance they have received from the goddess Athena, who joins Poseidon and shocks him with her request for his assistance in punishing the Greeks on their homeward voyage. Angered that the virgin priestess of Apollo, Cassandra, has been dragged by Ajax from Athena's altar and violated, the goddess now wants to punish the Greeks for their transgressions and "fill their journey home with pain." Poseidon readily agrees, delivering a final judgment on the Greeks: "Blind is the man who sacks cities with temples and tombs … himself so soon to die." The two gods depart having established the play's situation, sympathy for the Trojans, and central irony that the Greeks' triumph offends the gods and their well-known disastrous homecomings will result. Although Poseidon and Athena ally to punish the Greeks' offenses, they offer neither aid nor comfort to the prostrate figure of Hecuba, queen of Troy, below them, or the other Trojan victims. Hecuba has witnessed the death of her husband and two sons, Hector and Paris, and has fallen further, from queen to slave, than any other Trojan woman. She will serve as the human reference point for the drama, onstage from beginning to end, and will reflect the escalating suffering that surrounds her. Described by Poseidon as the "queen of grief," Hecuba, the classical archetype for tragic misfortune, is recalled by Hamlet as he measures the misery of one of the players: "What's he to Hecuba, or she to him, / That he should weep?" Hecuba invites the chorus of Trojan women captives to join her in a lament for their past lives while summoning their courage and forbearance to accept their fate. The play begins, therefore, with the proud assertion of Hecuba's fortitude, and it will proceed by successive, escalating assaults on her resolve and her conception of the limits of human despair.

A Greek herald, Talthybius, enters to carry out the order of distributing the Trojan captives to their new masters. One of the play's most disturbing and modern touches is keeping the agents of the play's agony offstage, with their decisions delivered by one who is only following orders. Hecuba's daughter, Cassandra, is to be the concubine of Agamemnon; her sister Polyxena is "to serve at Achilles' tomb." We know, through Poseidon, that Polyxena has already been sacrificed, news that will be later revealed to Hecuba by her daughter-in-law Andromache, who has been given to the son of her husband's slayer, Achilles' son Neoptolemus. Hecuba herself is to be the prize of Odysseus, who conceived the wooden horse and therefore is the man most responsible for Hecuba's fall from power and most hateful to her. Cassandra enters with a bridal torch in hand, singing to Hymen, the goddess of marriage, in a terrible parody of the marital rites that here links marriage and murder. As a seer fated not to be believed, Cassandra breaks her mother's heart in her presumed madness in joyfully celebrating her enslavement and death, though she actually reveals sinister truths. As Agamemmon's concubine she will become the agent of his and her own death and the destruction of his entire family. The victims here, she asserts, are not the Trojans, whose sacrifice in defense of family and home is noble, but the Greeks, and Cassandra's ultimate consolation is her awful prediction of mutually assured destruction. "Let us get on with it."
Cassandra's joyful embrace of her own destruction crushes Hecuba. She is revived by the thought that she still has another daughter left to her. That consolation is removed with the arrival of her daughter-in-law Andromache with her grandson Astyanax, amid Hector's possessions as trophies of war. Andromache tells Hecuba of Polyxena's death but argues that dying is better than living as Andromache must, as the most loyal of wives who must now commit the ultimate disloyalty to her husband's memory by giving herself to another. Hecuba counsels survival, urging Andromache to yield to the forces beyond her control in order to raise her son "to be a hero of Troy once again." This glimmering hope in Troy's future through Astyanax is extinguished as Talthybius returns to announce that the Greeks, convinced by Hecuba's new master Odysseus, have decided that the child must be killed, thrown from the city walls, thereby ending the Trojan royal line. "This scene," critic Gilbert Murray has stated, "with the parting between Andromache and the child which follows, seems to me perhaps the most absolutely heart-rending in all the tragic literature of the world. After rising from it one understands Aristotle's judgment of Euripides as 'the most tragic of the poets.'" Andromache is made to learn what is worse than disloyalty to a dead husband: the fate of her child whom she cannot protect. His grandmother's response is the stark, despairing realization: "There is nothing now. No justice."

However, Hecuba is roused for a final assertion to gain some justification for the pain and suffering endured by her, her family, and her kingdom as Helen is brought onstage for a reckoning. Invoked frequently up to this point as the cause of the Trojan's misery, Helen is tried, with Hecuba serving as the prosecutor. In the words of critic Eric A. Havelock, Euripides here succeeds in carrying "disillusionment one stage further" to expose "the sheer vacuity of normal moral pretensions." If someone is to blame, if there is a consequence and responsibility for human actions, Hecuba's prosecution suggests the existence of some moral order and justice in the world. Helen's "acquittal" will deal Hecuba a final, ultimate blow to the justification for the queen's and Troy's suffering. Menelaus has resolved to take Helen home to be killed there in punishment for the deaths her infidelity has caused. Hecuba tries to convince him to bring Helen to justice immediately in Troy. Helen defends herself by evading her complicity and blaming everyone from Aphrodite to Paris and Hecuba herself for her actions in a bravado performance of self-serving equivocation. Hecuba fails to rouse Menelaus to immediate punishment, and Helen departs, allowing her the opportunity to reverse her husband's death sentence through her wiles and sexual attractions. Ironically the one woman who gains a happy future in Euripides' play is the woman most responsible for the war in the first place. Hecuba is left realizing that Helen has triumphed and that there is no moral order in the universe.

The *Trojan Women* ends with a final heartbreak for Hecuba as the lifeless, broken body of Astyanax is carried in on Hector's shield. Hecuba delivers a concluding lament, judged by many the most moving speech Euripides ever wrote. Like Lear cradling the dead Cordelia, Hecuba has been taken from worse to worst, and the audience is presented with an ultimate nullity of human hopes and illusions that Hecuba bitterly summarizes as the final burning of Troy commences and the captives depart:

The man who believes his Fortune is secure is blind.
Fortune knows no reason.
She is mad, giving and taking at will.
No one controls one's own happiness.